

CLAUDE MONET



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NOTHING in the way of adverse criticism on his paintings or condemnation of his views of art will sound unfamiliar to Claude Monet. He is quite accustomed to abuse, and its intensity has long since ceased to surprise or ruffle him. His experience in this respect is not unique, for curiously enough the treatment given to Delacroix, Corot, Rousseau, and especially Millet in their day, was precisely that which has been lavishly bestowed upon Monet in his. Perhaps impotent rage never went quite so far in the case of these great masters as with him, for on one occasion he was derided as a "communist who deserved to be shot," while on another, "sous" were deposited on the edges of his pict-

ure frames, as in the cup of a mendicant, and the pleasantry was judged of excellent taste."

In looking at Monet's pictures, the most frequent as well as most childish criticisms made upon them are : That they seem crude in color and coarse in execution ; that they are strange and queer ; and those critics of art, who see the country in glimpses from a railway train on their two weeks' vacation from the city, declare that Monet must be a bad artist, because they never saw nature as he paints it.

In respect to this last objection, it may be answered ; if the truthfulness or falsity of a representation of nature is to be determined within the narrow limits of each individual's observation, then a confusion would arise, proportioned in its complications to the number of critics, and there would be practically an end to acceptable landscape art. It would certainly appear to be

the part of prudence, not to say of wisdom, to admit that among the innumerable truths which nature is constantly revealing, some few may have escaped our knowledge, which a more attentive student has discovered and recorded upon his canvas.

As to the criticism, that Monet's colors seem crude when freshly painted, it may be said ; that he seeks always to preserve the purity and transparency of his colors, and therefore places them side by side or over each other without mixing them often, and if their body seems thick and heavy, it is to secure in the end a mellowness and richness of tone, which thinly painted pictures can never possess. As to his execution, how admirable are the words of Jules Breton when applied to him.

“Painters should not trouble themselves too much about execution. I mean by this that they should have in view a sincere observation of Nature,

and shun as they would the plague the coquetries of the brush. Those whose aim is to display upon canvas their skilfulness of touch can succeed in pleasing only fools. Oh, the insipid skill of a hand which is always infallible ! Oh, the delightful unskilfulness of a hand trembling with emotion ! ”

Monet sees nature with nobody's eyes but his own, and he paints what he sees and what he feels with precision and fervor and an intense personality. His pictures, to be rightly judged, should be seen from a proper distance and not close at hand. A small canvas of Meissonier may oftentimes be best examined with a magnifying glass to reveal certain minutiae of detail and elaboration of finish, which among other qualities have made the works of this artist so wonderful and so highly prized. But with Monet's pictures quite another method should be employed. One should stand far enough

away from them to lose sight of his peculiarity of execution, but near enough to get the intended effect of his arrangement of colors, so that they become mingled to the eye, just as in fact they are mingled in nature when we look out upon a distant landscape or the sea; and then quite forgetting how other painters might have rendered these or similar scenes, we should appeal directly and frankly to Nature for comparison, not only in respect to the obvious physical facts which they record, but for their interpretation of the most subtle and fleeting truths, which the ordinary observer never discovers, but which always reward her thoughtful worshipers.

Claude Monet paints his pictures wholly in the open air. No studio revision ever touches his canvas. He begins and completes his work in the presence of Nature herself. He acknowledges no law save that of her un-

folding, and no tribunal of appeal above her decrees. His observant eye notices the serenity or the anger of the sky ; the majestic movement of the clouds ; the solidity and grandeur of the everlasting hills ; the flashing and bubbling of swift waters in rocky-bedded streams ; the warm sunlight sifted through the branches of trees, flecking the ground beneath, or lying in soft radiance upon the fields where poppies gleam ; the dashing of ocean waves as they rush upon the shore, out of the bosom of the deep ; the tenderness of flowers and the freshness of Spring ; the sparkle of the dew and the crispness of frost-covered hay-stacks glistening in the morning sun ; the fogs and the moving mists of the sea ; the coldness and solemnity of Winter when the hill-sides are covered with snow and ice cakes float in the limpid waters of the Seine ; all these various subjects, enveloped in breatheable air, he has paint-

ed with equal affection, and with such triumphant truthfulness and power as to stamp him the undisputed leader in the present school of Naturalistic Art.

Nor is it alone in the wide and diversified range of subjects that Claude Monet is distinguished among the artists of to-day ; but in painting every picture he pays strict attention to the appearance of the chosen subject in relation to the hour of the day selected for its representation. Many artists divide the day into morning, noon and evening, and confine their delineations of nature to some one of these periods, with an exactitude largely dependent upon the fidelity of their sketches or the tenacity of their memory. Monet, on the contrary, while recognizing these obvious divisions of the day, also adds to them a respect for the intervening hours, to every one of which he attaches its due importance. This enlarged range of observation

demands of him the most careful and exact study of nature, and imposes upon him a prodigious amount of labor, which his splendid physique and joyous temperament enable him to perform.

Having selected a subject for a picture and the hour of the day, he works steadily upon it until the conditions have materially changed, when he instantly stops and waits until another day arrives with similar conditions, when he continues his painting, and so on from time to time until at last he completes his work. Not unfrequently he has two canvases under way at the same moment, treating the same subject, but under such different conditions as to time and atmospheric environment, as to make each picture quite unlike the other, but both true to nature and masterpieces of their kind.

These self-imposed limitations, while

they heighten the truthfulness of the scenes he paints, materially diminishes the number of pictures to which he is willing to put the seal of his approval in the signature, "Claude Monet." When, therefore, we stand before one of his highly finished paintings, we know at once that Nature has been very kind to him and allowed him to see her day after day in the same mood and at the same hour, till he dismissed her with his work satisfactorily performed. The number of pictures begun by him and never finished is something extraordinary. All these incomplete attempts which failed to reach the fruition he sought for are put away as exercises merely in the practice of painting, and are never repaired in the studio and then offered for sale.

Monet's work, therefore, must always invoke serious attention, no matter how familiar or unfamiliar the sub-

jects may be which he has chosen to represent, because he has made the changeful hours of the day an integral part of their truthfulness. One may be quite assured, in looking at them, that they are no hasty impressions, however forcibly presented, of something he has seen and partly remembered, but that each is a veritable representation of Nature herself, observed at a particular hour of the day, and which he has transcribed in her very presence with all the truthfulness and all the power which his being could command.

“He has surprised Nature in all her moods and at all hours; in the fresh and fragrant *dishabille* of the early morning, under the dazzling effects of her midday toilet, in the languor of the twilight, in the sleep of night, white with the lacework of the moon. He has painted her under all her changing aspects, in her varying lights, with an eloquence which puts us in sympathy

with the life, vague or inanimate, which he has pictured."

Two French writers and critics, one the lamented Ernst Chesneau, the other, the brilliant Octave Mirbeau, have studied and commended in terms of enthusiastic praise, the works of Claude Monet. The former, after speaking of Paul Huet and Corot and Daubigny, and what they had accomplished in their day, proceeds with these forcible words :

"Then came the Impressionists. They gave us a new interpretation of nature, sincere but crotchety. They, though in a very different spirit, sacrificed details of form ; they insisted upon seeing and expressing action pure and simple. Nature is, in truth, so wide a world, that in the revolution of ages art will forever find unexplored realms and fresh springs of pictorial beauty. In these days when every outlet of energy tends to specializing, the Impres-

sionists have made a specialty of the movement of colored masses ; within their self-imposed limitations they have produced some works of prodigious and illusory effect ; such as ' Floating Ice on the Seine,' by M. Monet, and his ' Springtime at Argenteuil ' ; and, again, his admirable marine studies, in which we see for the first time in my experience, a living presentment of the throbbing sea, the glaucous hues of the deep ocean, the violet transparency of the shallows over a sandy bottom, all transient glories of changeful colors, all the fairy play of moving light. But, in spite of such works as these, the eye of the public—trained to exclusiveness by long intercourse with other and no less legitimate readings of nature, and perverted by the abuse of facile tricks of painting—refuses as yet to recognize the purpose and merit of this school. But they will come to it."

The other critic, Octave Mirbeau, in

an article published in *La France*, Nov. 21, 1884, thus describes Monet's powers, and the character of his work :

“I do not know, among modern landscapists, a painter more complete, more vibrating, more varying in expression than Claude Monet. His subjects are always simple, without arrangement or decoration and with no search for effect. He paints things just as they are ; places them in their proper light and in the ambient air. A road, a tree, a glimpse of the sky, he needs no more to give us a veritable masterpiece. Here is one of his pictures ; first a field of oats of a pale green, almost colorless under the ardent midday sun ; a little path across it like a ribbon of gold ; then some thick wheat almost ripe rises up like a wall, and behind the wheat little tree tops of a deep green color. You see it is nothing, but it is a grand picture. All this bit of nature breathes

a silence, a tranquility, the heaviness of summer heat."

Here is another: a meadow has been lately mown; already the fresh grass shows the tender green of its young blades above the reddened field. Piled here and there are stacks of yellow hay; further on rises a bushy hedge; a curtain of poplar trees shuts off the gray sky where little clouds are flying. The leaves tremble, moved softly by the breeze, and through the leaves the sky is seen, then lost to sight, so that one can imagine glimpses of a country beyond which cannot be seen."

"Brought face to face with nature in whatever form, M. Monet has painted it with the same sincerity, the same affection, the same power. He has brought out from his palette all the fire and all the decomposition of light, all the play of shadow; all the magic of the moon, all the vanishing of the mist. I believe there is not in nature a condition so

peculiar, an impression so rapid, a reverie so intense, that he will not be able to catch its spirit and render it with all its shades of color and all the palpitations of its life. He can only be placed by the side of the great Corot, upon whom Cabanel pronounced the judgment, infamous if it were not stupendously comic,—“Corots, oh, yes, we made them with our palette scrapings—at hazard.”

And so at fifty-one years of age, away from Paris, with its anxieties, its jealousies and its juries, in the midst of a peaceful landscape near Giverny, Claude Monet lives his life of artistic toil, free as the air he breathes, loving Nature as he does his own children, painting whatever pleases his fancy, unburdened with debt and unembittered by neglect, and produces from time to time these new interpretations of Nature which have already won for him an immortal fame.

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